

Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil

THE LIFE, LEGACY, AND LOVE
OF MY SON MICHAEL BROWN

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EXHIBIT
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because a mother will put her pride to the side and accept help from others to make ends meet and care for her children.

As my firstborn, Mike Mike saw my struggles the most, and I know that motivated him to accomplish the dream I had of finishing school. Same for my other three kids who came after Mike Mike. *I know* they can go farther and do better than me and be successful in this life. So on May 23, 2014, when Mike Mike received his high school diploma, just a few months before he was gunned down, I was able to live my dream through him.

Every day is rough for me, but like Maya Angelou said, "Still I rise!" Amen! I find a way to smile because my baby had aspirations and dreams. That really gives me comfort on the low days. That's why I got to clear things up, because folks out here got it twisted: Mike Mike wasn't a criminal who deserved to be shot like a dangerous animal. He was a good boy who cared about the right things, and family and friends were at the top of his list. He didn't have a police record. He never got in trouble. He was a techie, in love with computers. He loved his mama and was proud to be headed to college and of the things he knew. The whole family was proud of him, too.

When my son was killed, everybody had his or her own version of how everything went down. Cops with their version of the facts. People living in the Canfield Apartments with another. The television and newspaper people, EMTs, firemen, old people, young people, black, white, you name it—everyone with a different story that was supposed to be the truth about my son's last minutes on earth.

My son was dead on the street in front of the world, and everybody except Mike Mike was busy telling his story. Even in the months since that horrible day, people still haven't stopped talking, from Twitter to Facebook to Instagram, in the beauty shop and coffee shop, everywhere.

Well, let me just say this: I wasn't there when Mike Mike was shot. I didn't see him fall or take his last breath, but as his mother, I do know one thing better than anyone, and that's how to tell my son's story, and the journey we shared together as mother and son. So I'm about to give it to you.

This is the truth of it.

CHAPTER ONE

FOUR AND A HALF HOURS TOO LONG

The deli at Straub's where I worked had been jumping since I got there. Straub's is a kind of cozy gourmet market. It's in a suburb called Clayton, where you got mini glass skyscrapers; little cafes with that chichi, froufrou food, you know those kind of restaurants where the menu be making basic stuff like a house salad sound like a foreign language; and boutiques that be selling a T-shirt for fifty dollars just because it's got some high-end designer's name on it, and I could go right over to Dots or Rainbow and get a shirt that look just as good for fifteen.

The county court was just down the block, so we got a lot of lawyers, judges, and businesspeople coming in to buy lunch. But we also got some of the regular, everyday folks that worked in the offices around there, like county clerks, DMV workers, secretaries, basically the people who do all the work for those high-paid people.

Then you had your white soccer moms and a lot of rich old white people who came in to do their weekly shopping. Mixed in, there are a handful of black professionals. I was so proud when I saw a brotha come up to my counter, representing with his Brooks Brothers suit on, showing them white folks that we had it going on too.

One of my best customers was Mrs. Hirschfeld, a little Jewish lady who was real cool and always came directly to me. One day I saw her coming in the door and figured I'd make her my last customer before my break.

me something to eat. The more we talked, the more I started liking him.

Andre started making me feel important. My flaws didn't bother him. Andre showed me attention. He treated me like a lady.

But I was still trying to tighten my life up so I was taking it really slow. Besides, I wanted to really know the man before I got involved again. I need someone who could love me enough and love my kids as well.

I didn't renew my lease on my apartment because I couldn't afford it by myself. So me and the kids moved back home to Mama's on Edmond.

When Andre brought Déja a battery powered car for her second birthday, Mike was standing across the street with some friends. He just watched us.

Three days later, Mike came driving down the street with a friend. He saw me sitting in the car with Andre and he threw a bottle at his car, shattering one of Andre's windows. Andre got so mad, he burned rubber down the block trying to get back to his house. I tried to calm him down, but there was no getting through to him. Next thing I knew he was out of the car and had jumped in his other car and left me behind.

When I got back to my mama's house I found out that Mike and Andre had had a run in and Andre had used his gun. Luckily nobody got shot. At that point, I couldn't communicate with Mike anymore, and I had to put Andre on ice. I was distraught. I had to decide if I was going to end my relationship with Andre or not.

Mike was still living with his parents. I hated being so close to where he was, but it meant the kids still got a lot of time with the Browns and we were close to Pine Lawn Elementary where Mike Mike was going to go that fall.

It was a big moment for me to drop Mike Mike off at Kindergarten on his first day. I wanted the teacher to know how special he was to me.

Taking Mike Mike to school and kissing him goodbye was one of my favorite parts of the day, that and getting him ready.

I was a young mama and I loved dressing him up, especially when he went to school. Mike Mike had always been a husky kid, short and

chunky, and making sure his clothes had a good fit was challenging at times. Mrs. Brown would cut, hem, sew, nip, and tuck, and we would get him right. His hair was always in a fresh low cut.

Before I knew it, he was in second grade. I had a meeting with his teacher who was concerned that Mike Mike was facing some challenges.

"Miss McSpadden, we think Michael has ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He is having difficulty concentrating." She was very matter-of-fact. "They have medicines for this type of thing."

I cocked my head to the side, trying to process what she had just said to me. "Hold up, ma'am. Are you saying something is wrong with my son?"

"It's a learning disorder," she said.

"What do you mean learning disorder? He learns perfectly fine at home. He plays video games, puts puzzles together, and he recites things back to me." I swallowed hard to keep from being emotional. I don't know what kid his age is going to pay attention the whole time.

"Well, Miss McSpadden, it's just an observation. The school can help if you decide to get further evaluation."

"Thank you for your observation, ma'am, but with all due respect, I observe him every day. We don't need any medicine." I grabbed my purse. "We are going to be all right, I'll take my son to his doctor to get a proper evalutation," I said politely and strutted out that room.

I was smart enough to know that a whole bunch of medicine can't be good for anybody, let alone a kid.

I took him to the doctors anyway, just to be safe. They immediately gave him a prescription of Aderall. Mama gave him the medicine once in his food and it had Mike Mike walking around like a Zombie. I told her never to give it to him again. I even told the school that. Nothing was wrong with my son.

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Mrs. Brown got Mike Mike a bike. It was so exciting to see him learn to pedal and balance, and suddenly he was off. I was worried about him riding through the neighborhood. I warned him and Mrs. Brown about him

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I was at Straub's scooping potato salad into a pint for a customer when I felt my phone vibrate. I saw that Mike Mike's school was calling and asked one of my coworkers to take over. I slipped into a back room at the store. The school nurse was on the other end, and I was terrified that she was calling to tell me that my son had been hurt. She explained that Mike Mike had come down with a bad headache. It was one of the busiest days at work, and I wanted to make sure that the boy wasn't trying to just get out of school.

The nurse gave him aspirin, but said his headache hadn't gone away and his blood pressure was running high. Something was seriously wrong. I took him to his pediatrician who wanted Mike Mike to see a cardiologist right away. When I heard that, everything in the room felt very far away and I was filled with a quiet panic.

Then I found out that his Medicaid didn't cover him to see a cardiologist. I yelled at the insurance people over the phone. I pleaded with the doctors to make an exception. In the end, Straub's allowed me to add him into my work insurance. So I quickly got him in to see a heart doctor at the St. Louis Children's Hospital where they could start monitoring him, but before we could go back for a follow-up, he had another episode at school again. I rushed him to the emergency room.

"Mama, am I gonna be OK?"

"Of course, baby. Don't be thinkin' nothing bad. We gonna find out what's wrong with you. I promise," I tried to hide my own terror. Mike Mike was a sophomore in high school, he was already towering over me, but in that moment all I could see was my little boy, and I could see he was afraid.

When we got to the hospital, they admitted him immediately to ICU. I was pacing and wringing my hands.

"Mama, what does all this mean?" Mike Mike asked looking at all the monitors they had him hooked up to.

"Mike Mike, they just wanna make sure your heart is OK, but don't talk. I want you to rest."

"Mama, you think they gonna find out what's wrong with me?"

"We gonna get through this, Mike Mike." I just held his hand until he drifted off to sleep.

When the doctor pulled me out of the room to explain what they were going to be looking for, I just couldn't hold it together any longer. I broke down crying.

Mike Mike was suffering from hypertension. He was overweight and his heart was working too hard.

After his hospital stay, they put him on meds, but Mike Mike would complain occasionally about chest pains and headaches. I knew that it was all about changing my son's lifestyle, his eating habits for one, and trying to get him to exercise. But it's tough getting a teenager to understand the seriousness of things sometimes.

"Mike Mike, what did you eat yesterday?" I probed.

I seasoned up some chicken cutlets and laid them on the grill outside.

"Mama, I didn't eat nothin' bad." I could hear it in his voice that he had probably eaten something fried or ordered a pizza at one of his grandmothers' houses.

"Mike Mike, you have to do what the doctors say. You are the one who's going to suffer, but it hurts me to see you in pain."

"Mama, don't worry. I'mma be fine," he winked.

I made his plate with the grilled chicken, broccoli, and rice, and he complained. Mike Mike was hardheaded, and didn't think his illness was all that important.

It wasn't until we found ourselves back in ICU and he was hooked up to more machines that he began to take the hypertension seriously. His vision was impaired and he was in bad shape. I just kept praying, "This too shall pass."

He wasn't a talkative kid, but I knew he not only felt bad physically, but that he was worried about what was happening to him. Seeing all the doctors and the nurses discussing their reports in front of him, and then discussing what test they were going to run next, shook him up. After several days in the hospital they released him, and Mike Mike immediately started eating fruits and vegetables and smaller portions, and

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MANCHILD WITH PROMISE

September 2013 was the start of Mike Mike's senior year.

"Boy, what is you doin'? What is all this on my table?" I had walked into the kitchen and found Mike Mike at the table with all these computer pieces spread out.

"Mama, don't touch nothin'. I'mma clean it up in a minute. I'm fixin' somethin' on my game."

He was in deep concentration. I lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. I was watching my child do something I'd never seen before. I thought he was going to leave permanent grooves in his forehead he was concentrating so hard. He sat semi-hunched over. His eyeglasses had slid down on his nose.

Mike Mike looked like a doctor performing brain surgery, placing one tiny computer piece after another tiny piece inside other larger computer chip pieces. Then he pushed green wires into tiny holes in a plastic box. I was getting a headache just watching. It was like one big electronic brain that he had just put back together. Mike Mike placed the last computer piece in place and then stretched his back and smiled, pride beaming out of him.

"Mike Mike, look what you did!"

"I ain't know you was still in here, Mama," he said, a little embarrassed.

"You fixed that whole computer, Mike Mike?" I was amazed.

"Yeah, Mama," he said matter-of-factly.

"My baby is a genius!"

"Aw, that was just a li'l somethin'-somethin,'" he blushed.

"Boy, you really are good at this."

"Yeah, you think so, Mama?" he asked, flashing me that grin of his that grabbed my heart every time, no matter that he'd been using it on me since he was an itty-bitty boy.

"I know so! You my brainiac," I said, leaning in to kiss him on the cheek.

Mike Mike had always been into his video games, but he was using his brain in a different, bigger way now. I just wanted him to be around more people like him so he could learn and grow.

I was headed in late to work one morning after a doctor's appointment and decided to drop off some clothes for Mike Mike at Mrs. Brown's.

I dashed up her front steps and rang the doorbell. When the door opened, it was Mike Mike standing in front of me.

"What the hell you doin' here?"

"Um, well, I wasn't feelin' good, so I wasn't gonna go, and then . . ."

He was stumbling and stuttering all over the place.

"No, you bullshitin' me! You take yo' ass to school!" I said, pushing my way into the house. "Do your granny know you here?"

"I don't know. No," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Naw, Mike Mike. Look, you cain't just decide you don't wanna go to school. You don't have a choice. You s'posed to be graduatin' this year!"

Mike Mike looked away. This wasn't too long after we'd had a big fight about him getting failing grades. I was furious but tried to keep my cool.

"Mike Mike, is somethin' wrong at school? You know what? You gonna come home with me and ride that bus up to Lucas and Hunt Boulevard, or I'll drop you off on my way to Straub's."

"I don't know if I'mma graduate. Miss White said I ain't got the credits."

"Oh, I'mma get to the bottom of this. I'm callin' whoever this Miss White is now!"

My brain was in overdrive. I was trying to map out a plan in my head. I didn't care if we had to get up at 5:00 in the morning, I was going to just have to do it to get Déja, Moo Moo, Jazzy, and Mike Mike to school, then myself to work.

I couldn't dial the number to the school fast enough. I fired up a cigarette. Mike Mike was giving me attitude, but I didn't care. My leg was shaking like crazy. I took puff after puff in between barking orders into the phone for the school secretary to get me to a lady named Miss White. On second thought, I hung up. In person would be better. I called out sick.

I sat in front of Miss White and looked her up and down.

"Well, Miss McSpadden, we didn't even know you existed," she said, slightly sarcastic, peering over her reading glasses. She leaned back in her chair and adjusted her suit jacket, which was a little too tight. It turned out Big Mike, who registered Mike Mike for school since he lived in district, didn't put me down as an emergency contact. So while he and his girlfriend had been receiving calls from the school, I'd been in the dark.

"First, of all, I'm Mike Mike's mother, and I've always existed. Just 'cause a father registers a child don't mean the mama ain't nowhere around. I'm here to tell you that starting today, his mama is taking charge! I want to know what does my son need and how do we help him?"

I just wanted him to get his diploma. At this point his biggest challenge was getting through the schoolwork.

I developed a relationship with Miss White after that day, and she was doing a weekly check-in with me about Mike Mike's progress and what he needed to do. We were all determined to get him into that cap and gown. But when it was all said and done, I needed Mike Mike to step up. One day she called me while I was at work to tell me he wasn't turning in homework on time.

"If Mike Mike isn't doing what he needs to be doing, then damn right, you better call me!" I was in between preparing a catering order and wrapping a customer's sandwich in the back with the phone cradled between my ear and shoulder.

After that call, Mike Mike was at my house doing homework before I drove him back to Mrs. Brown's house. He threw his pencil down and pushed away from the table.

"Mike Mike, what's wrong?" I asked, putting my hand on his shoulder. I knew he was frustrated and wished I could've helped him more

with the work.

"Is the work stressin' you?"

He nodded.

"And, Mama, that teacher don't like me."

"No, Mike Mike, *she* don't need a diploma. It has everything to do with completin' what *you* s'posed to."

I had to make him understand so he didn't do like I had done for so many years of my life. I had been blaming other people for what I needed to be doing.

"Look, Mike Mike, just like you write your rhymes, you can write these essays. I'm bein' hard on you now because you gotta do this work to get where you need to go. I want you to be better than me, and to do more than me and yo' daddy. I might not have finished high school myself, but you my firstborn, and I know you can do what I didn't." Mike Mike was quiet. He was a boy growing up, and it was hard getting him to listen sometimes, but I know he heard me loud and clear that night.

I pulled to a stop in front of Mrs. Brown's house and turned to him. "Mike Mike, you have to do what you're supposed to do, not what you want to do and say that's good enough you've done it. You are not an adult, and you're not a boss. You gonna have to take orders from somebody. People are always gonna be tellin' you or askin' you things until you learn how to do those things and you become a boss of your own. So get your shit together so you can be on the tellin'-and-askin' end instead of the other way around."

He kissed me good-bye, gave me a hug, and got out the car.

It was a hard period, but we made it through the first semester, and 2014 was starting. I just had to keep pushing him. Mike Mike and me went back and forth so much I wanted to scream, but just when I was feeling like there was nothing else to do, something clicked. I finally broke through to him and he started working harder. Normandy High School got him linked up with the PAL Center. It was a special program that would help him get his diploma that was set up within the school. PAL stood for Positive Alternative to Learning. I felt like everyone was rooting for my baby. I thought about that African Proverb: It takes a village to raise a child. That always

you the diploma," she said.

"No, no, he earned it. I have to work. I cain't get off till 2:30, but he'll be there!"

Big Mike took Mike Mike up to the school but didn't stay for the graduation. Mike Mike's cap and gown was at my mama's, so they gave him one to wear, but it was too small. He wore it proudly, though.

I drove like a bat out of hell, blasting my music, singing along with the radio. I was trying to make it to Mike Mike before he left the school. I pulled up, and everyone was gone. I had missed it. My heart sank a little, but the news was too good to sit around wallowing.

I decided to drive the route he usually walked. I turned down St. Louis Avenue and spotted him up ahead in his stonewashed jeans, white T-shirt, and red baseball cap.

"Mike Mike!" I shouted out the window.

He stopped, turned around, and made a slow jog to the car. We were both smiling and speechless. I immediately saw the large brown envelope in his hand. He had on his eyeglasses and looked so studious.

Mike Mike held up the envelope.

"Get in the car, Mike Mike. Let me see it!"

He got in and pulled out his diploma.

"See, I told you, you could do it," I said, admiring it like it was a precious gem.

"Yeah, I know, Mama."

"So where you wanna go?" I was ready to celebrate.

"Naw, Mama, just take me to Gun Gun's. I'm finna go hang out with Brandon an' 'em."

I tried to cover my disappointment. "Aw, OK, it's cool. I just want you to have fun."

I wanted to go kick it, just me and him. I was gonna treat him to a big dinner, then scoop up Déja, Moo Moo, Jazzy, and Louis, and we all just have a big party. But Mike Mike was my simple kid. He didn't want all that fanfare.

We coasted along, headed to my mama's house. Mike Mike turned up the radio and was nodding his head to the music.

This was a summer of celebration. I decided to host the Fourth of July festivities at my house. Louis set the music up and had the grill going. That was his territory. I had all the eyes on the stove occupied. I was in my zone, going from seasoning up my baked beans to stirring my spaghetti to testing out my famous barbecue sauce. Louis navigated his way into our narrow kitchen and handed me a pan of ribs hot off the grill. I slid them into the oven next to a tray of chicken wings and breasts.

Brittanie, her boyfriend, and her two kids had just arrived. Bernard, Mama, and my daddy were sippin' on beers. I was lookin' out the kitchen window on to the driveway at Déja, Moo Moo, Jazzy, Louis's son, Li'l Louis, and Mike Mike. They were all shooting fireworks, laughing, having a good time. Nothing made me happier than the family together.

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It was hot, and the sky was clearer than it had been in a long time. I woke up thinking about my granny so I called my mama to ask if she wanted to go fishing.

Me, Louis, Moo Moo, and Jazzy pulled up in front of Mama's house, and my uncle Carl was already out front. Brittanie's car was parked in the driveway. Louis honked twice.

"C'mon, Uncle Carl! Get Mama, too. I ain't tryin' to be late to the lake," I said.

One by one the whole family filed out the house—Mama, Brittanie, and her seven-year-old son, MJ, and ten-year-old daughter, Kiah. Uncle Carl was bringing up the rear, when all of a sudden, out came Mike Mike trying to tie his shoe and keep moving at the same time.

"Mike Mike, you comin' too?" I was grinning ear to ear.

"Yeah, Mama," he said, leaning over to hug me. "I gotta show y'all how it's done!"

"Yay, Mike Mike!" Jazzy was jumping up and down.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ME AND GOD AGAINST THE ODDS

On August 5, 2014 Mike Mike and Maurice were in the basement at my mama's making beats. Me, Brittanie, and Mama were upstairs when the boys decided to get some fresh air. The rain had just ended.

A few minutes later, Mike Mike started calling, "Mama! Gun Gun! Brittanie!" He was standing on Mama's back porch looking up to the sky. He was taking pictures with his phone. "C'mere, I got something to show y'all!"

"Mike Mike, what you doin'?" I asked, stepping outside.

He made us all gather around.

"You see these clouds?" he asked, pointing to a picture on his phone.

"Yeah, and what exactly are we lookin' at, Mike Mike?" Brittanie asked with a frown.

"I don't see nothin,'" my mama said, squinting.

"Me neither, Mama," I added.

"Aw, man, I cain't believe y'all don't see that. It's God and the devil fightin' each other." Mike Mike leaned back and folded his arms across his chest.

Mike Mike looked at us like we were crazy. I knew Mike Mike smoked weed. I didn't approve of it, and he knew that and didn't do it around me. Maybe he was high, maybe not—either way he was wrestling with something bigger that night.

"I don't hardly see none of that," Mama said.

We waved him off and headed back into the house, but Brittanie said, "Mike Mike, maybe it's only meant for you to see it and not me too."

"No, just look at the picture, Brittanie!" he said, getting frustrated. To him, whatever he saw was clear as day.

The next day Mike Mike was still trying to show all of us that picture, but his phone just up and stopped working. It wasn't the battery. It just stopped. But something had taken over him. Something I hadn't ever seen or heard before. It was deep. I didn't know where it was coming from neither. It was all about God.

Mrs. Brown had church every Saturday in her living room with her pastor, Pastor Larry. Mike Mike and Déjà had grown up being around those weekly gatherings. Me, I've never been a member of a church or gone to one regularly, but I've always believed in God. When I was growing up Granny's house was the centerpiece of religious holidays like Christmas and Easter. She'd prepare a feast, and Mama would dress us in our best dresses and hats. Even though Mama didn't take us to church, we always knew that God was who you prayed to and got your blessings from. So, I've always considered myself a Christian.

Like most kids, Mike Mike and Déjà both were bored sitting through those Saturday church gatherings. He tried to skip them every chance he got. But as he got older, especially once he got into high school, he started to check them out more. I think he was finding his own way. He had made up his mind to build his own kind of relationship with God.

Mike Mike was on a mission to spread his message, and none of us were understanding it. He was clearly discovering his own connection to spirituality. He talked to Bernard, and Bernard being a deep thinker, he may have understood Mike Mike the most.

"Bernard, I been tryin' to get everybody to understand what I saw in the sky. It was real," Mike Mike said, sitting next to him in Mama's backyard.

"Yeah, man, I feel you. It's a lotta spirits and stuff out here in the universe," Bernard nodded. "But, Mike Mike, whatever relationship you got with God, that's yours you ain't gotta defend it if folks ain't feelin' what you sayin'."

"I'm tellin' you, Nette Pooh, somethin' done took over Mike Mike. Somethin' I ain't ever seen or heard before. I don't like all this stuff he sayin' about death."

"He'll be fine, Brittanie. Stop worryin'."

I got my good-night hugs in and left. I know when something's bothering Brittanie it's hard for her to let it go. I'm the same way. Her and Mike Mike always had a closeness. Sometimes hed tell her something before me, and I was his own mama. I was sure when he was ready to talk, hed call her.

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Mike Mike was definitely thinking a lot about life, and he was thinking about death too. He didn't seem scared about Gun Gun dying, or his stepmother. I don't know what Mike Mike had been reading or who he had been talking to, but he seemed like he had a lot on his mind. So he took it to social media.

In his final days, his Facebook posts, which I didn't see until much later, had a fervor and spirituality that I'd never heard from him before:

August 6, 2014, at 11:40 p.m.

We in a world full of hell and certain people that are chosen to move on to the next

August 6, 2014, at 11:41 p.m.

Dont hate each other love each other as if we were all a big family aint no tellin when u go need the next person just because you fucked up on yo behalf we better than that yall betta step up to the plate and make sum changes flat out

August 6, 2014, at 11:49 p.m.

Its not only one god everyone has their own god and it takes you to bring that god out of you

August 6, 2014, at 11:50 p.m.

Because the real you wants better for you and the people around you all you have to do is forgive thats all and move on and better thingz will fall in place slowly I promise

August 7, 2014, at 5:07 p.m.

Its funny how I was raised by church folks but neva read the bible but I have a full understandin of the illuminati its not devil worshoping it's the other way around

August 7, 2014, at 5:09 p.m.

I honestly believe that the person that is sacrificed has to be a love one in order to test how you can deal with your stress

August 7, 2014, at 7:18 p.m.

Trynna heal and feed all my people we shall not fear no evil fuck the BS be about you business and kill that fake shit with kindness we all will face the truth sooner or later but for as of now u go either learn or fall off the cliff left senseless after all you told me to mind my business while I was trynna stick my hand n yo shit and pull you out of it

August 8, 2014, at 3:14 a.m.

I believe I found the answer to my question to why I feel like Im breathing in water my home boi sis told me she once heard before that god got swallowed by a whale and was sent to deliever a message to some other kingdom or something IDK

August 8, 2014, at 3:14 a.m.

Yall seeking for the truth help me bring it out

August 8, 2014, at 3:16 a.m.

The truth hurts like a mug fucka I swear but ill neva give up on you all

August 8, 2014, at 3:22 a.m.

I could use a hug right now FR

August 8, 2014, at 3:23 a.m.

The devil still after me as well but he hatin cause im back and im turning
hell into a true fairy tale

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WON'T BRING HIM BACK

When something bad happens—I mean really bad—you find yourself trying to put it all in some order, make it make sense. But when it's something so messed up, sometimes it's like a million pieces of a puzzle scattered out in front of you. How are you supposed to put that together?

August 9, 2014

Bernard was at Mama's house with his girlfriend, Kat. I had planned on going by there on my way home. Brittanie was on her way to get Mama something to eat at Subway.

When Brittanie drove past Mike Mike, she was on her way out of the Canfield Apartments complex, and he was headed back in, walking down Canfield Drive with a skinny short dude wearing dreads. She figured she'd just catch him back at Mama's.

Something was about to happen, but none of us knew it.

"I'm finna go to work, Mama," Bernard said, checking his watch. They left. Mama was there with MJ and Kiah. Déja had just called to check in.

"Gun Gun, you OK?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm just waitin' on Brittanie to come back with my food," Mama said.

"OK, I'm home with Jazzy and Moo Moo. I'll see you later. Oh, tell Mike Mike to call me."

She hung up and just as Brittanie was coming back in the front door

with the food, Kat came running, out of breath, her chest heaving. She could barely get her words out.

"They, they, they just shot Mike Mike!" she screamed.

"Who?"

The bag of sandwiches slipped from Brittanie's hands and landed with a thud on the floor.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Brittanie let out a moan.

Mama stood up slowly, thinking Kat must've made a mistake.

MJ and Kiah started screaming, talking over each other, "Mike Mike! Mike Mike got shot? Mama, what is happening?"

"Don't leave this house!" Mama ordered MJ and Kiah.

Brittanie burst out the screen door and took off running toward Canfield Drive, which was just off the short lane Mama lived on at the back of the complex. Mama was running behind her. The last thing she was worried about was her heart.

"Nette . . . Nette Pooh!" Brittanie's voice cracked, in and out of a high-pitched quiver, then they stopped. Between big gulping sounds, she got out eight words to me: "Nette Pooh, the police just shot Mike Mike."

I was paralyzed at first, and then a gust of wind shot through my body. I took off like lightning. All I could think was *Oh God, I gotta get to my son, make sure he all right.*

I burst into the front doors of Straub's, frantically shouting, "I need to get to my son! The police just shot my son! Get me to Ferguson, please!" I screamed before collapsing into my coworker Erica's arms.

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Mama was huffing and puffing by the time she reached where Brittanie was standing. Her mouth was moving like a fish that had been washed up on the riverbank. She couldn't breathe. When she saw Mike Mike's body laying out there in the street, she screamed.

"Can I hold him?" Mama begged the police. Of course they wouldn't let her. Mama stumbled back to the house.

Brittanie's phone rang. It was Déjà. "What happened to Mike Mike?"

"Déjà, I'mma call you back," Brittanie said.

"Tell me what happened?" Déjà begged.

"The police shot Mike Mike, Déjà," Brittanie said.

Déjà started screaming into the phone, and then she hung up. She immediately got Moo Moo and Jazzy together, and they started walking to Mama's house.

By the time I jumped out of my coworker's car at the top of Canfield Drive, it was filled with people and police cars. I spotted Big Mike and we both started running.

They had covered Mike Mike's body by the time we got there, but Brittanie, Mama, Bernard, and Kat had seen him. I was going out of my mind begging for information, answers, something. But the cops told me nothing, no matter how loud I screamed, cursed, or punched the air.

Time kept ticking. One hour, two hours, three, then four, then four and a half. Covered or not covered, he was left out like old rotting garbage. Leaving somebody's child out there like the police did wasn't procedure, or protocol, or even human.

My baby's body, underneath a white sheet, motionless. The bullet had blown his red cap off and it was resting quietly several feet away.

Then time just stopped and so did my breath.

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They took Mike Mike's body away and didn't even allow me to give him a proper good-bye. Maybe I wouldn't have wanted to see him like he was, but I'm his mama. That should've been my choice. They said it was because this was an official police investigation. But how are the police going to investigate themselves?

Louis grabbed a piece of cardboard, scribbled words on it, and ran to the corner, holding up a sign that read FERGUSON POLICE JUST EXECUTED MY UNARMED SON.

I waited and waited, walked up and down the hot concrete, sweating till my hair fell limp and began to curl and kink up at the roots. Who had killed my baby? I was on a mission, and I needed his name. I wanted to

know what he looked like. I wanted to look him right in the eye, and ask him why. Why had he, a police officer, just murdered my unarmed son. But all the cops were tight-lipped. They were protecting the killer, but who had been protecting my son?

I was dizzy under the sweltering heat. Brittanie was trying to be strong for me, but she kept breaking down into tears herself. At one point we was both walking around aimlessly trying to get answers.

"Nette Pooh, we need to find somebody . . ." Her words trailed off. Her face had a pained and confused expression on it. I saw a short, round officer and swiftly made my way to him. I was determined to get his attention. He sharply motioned for me to back up.

"Just settle down!" he ordered.

"Settle down?" I said, jumping up and down. I threw a plastic water bottle hard at the sidewalk. The water splattered on the pavement. "That muthafucka shot my baby, and you tellin' me to settle down? Kiss my ass. That's what you do!" I turned and walked away, but not before taking my hand and yanking a piece of the yellow crime-scene tape down.

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Me and Brittanie slowly moved toward the bloodstained pavement where Mike Mike's body had been left under the baking sun and stood in a daze, and I began shaking my head. "Why?" I called out. The police had left him out there like he wasn't nobody's. But I needed them and the rest of the world to know that Mike Mike did belong to somebody, a whole damn family, and he was mine before he was anybody else's.

A crowd of strangers gathered around, chanting, "Hands up! Don't shoot!"

A hand reached through the crowd and handed me a bouquet of roses. I pulled off each rose petal and dropped it on the pavement, covering what was now sacred ground to me.

More police cars rushed into the area. It was as if they were daring anybody to get out of hand. Helicopters swarmed overhead. News cameras were rolling, and some guy clicked photos of me. A TV reporter

shoved a microphone in my face and asked, "What do you have to say about what happened to your son?"

"What I got to say is to the policeman who murdered my son," I said, looking directly into the camera. "You're not God! You don't get to decide when you get to take somebody from here!" I could feel a powerful force rising up in me. "You don't do a dog like that. You didn't have to shoot him eight times if he was doin' nothin' to you and you was tryin' to stop him!"

Each word I shouted made my body jerk forward. "You just shot all through my baby's body. This was wrong and coldhearted!"

"What are the police saying to you right now about what's happened to your son?" the woman reporter asked me.

"They haven't told me anything. They wouldn't even let me identify my son. The only way I knew it was my son was from people out here showing me his picture on the Internet!"

"He threw his hands up! He ain't have no gun. The boy threw his hands up, and the police just shot him," I heard a woman yell out from the crowd.

Louis was holding me from behind, but when we heard that, he slumped over my shoulders and started to wail in a low tone.

"You took my son away from me!" I wanted my words to rip through that officer. "You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many! Because you bring them down to this type of level where they feel like 'I don't have nothin' to live for anyway. They gon' try to take me out anyway."

All breath had escaped me. I felt myself getting limp, but Louis was right there holding me up on my feet.

A man stepped through the crowd and ushered us over to a prayer circle. Some were young, some old. There were arms stretched out to the sky and toward me.

"Lord, we just come here now, and we ask that you lift this family up, this mother and this father."

His words were firm, and I started to feel breath in my body again.

A woman reached out and placed her hand on my arm.

"We know that you are the answer to everything and every situation."

think it was many more than that. The medical examiner is conducting a medical examination today to determine that, and please keep in mind it's going to take as long as six weeks."

He still refused to name the officer who had shot Mike Mike.

"They need to show the cop's face like they showing Mike Mike!" Louis said, shaking his head.

"They some cowards!" I screamed at the television.

I didn't want to see another second of the news. I stalked into the living room and sat down for what seemed like hours in a zombie state. I didn't even hear my husband let my coworker Miss B in. My face was swollen, and I had cried so much it hurt to even look up. She touched me on my shoulder. I turned toward her.

"I just came by to see if you needed anything, Lezley," she whispered softly.

I couldn't answer. She swallowed hard, not sure what to say next. "I'm not gonna stay, but we all prayin' for you. Your customers are, too. Um, Mrs. Hirschfield came by the store and wanted me to give you this." She pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

I opened it slowly and pulled out a picture. It had a tiny note written on it. I couldn't believe it was a class picture of me in the fourth grade at Reed Elementary. I was trying to make sense of how Mrs. Hirschfield got this.

"That lady was real upset after seein' the news. She wanted us all to know that she really knew you. She even wanted everyone to know that your son couldn't have done nothin' wrong, because you were a good person, and you had to have raised a good son."

Just like I didn't notice Miss B coming in, it didn't register that she had left. I just held the picture, my hand trembling. Her son had been my elementary school classmate, and they remembered me from back then. From the moment I met her at Straub's, it always felt like I knew her from somewhere else. Now it all made sense.

"They gonna set up a fund for you at Straub's," Louis said softly.

I turned toward him and nodded, placing my hand over my mouth. I had been loyal to Straub's for all these years, but I never imagined that they'd do something like this for me.

Even as my community pulled together to support my family, last night's looting made it clear that things were becoming dangerously divided in St. Louis.

For the black people, Mike Mike getting shot was like an old scab being pulled off a wound filled with racism. Young people were mad about not having jobs, money, how the white police mainly be treating young black men—pulling them over, locking them up, beating them down. Older black people felt like it was time to raise their voices. Some white people just saw the shooting as the police doing their job and looked at the black people out there looting as animals. I was upset at the looting, too. Why would we tear up our own neighborhood? And I didn't want anybody doing nothing in Mike Mike's name if it wasn't about getting that cop convicted. At the same time, I been around a long time, and I know what it's like to be mad because you feel like you don't have any opportunities out there. I just didn't want any more violence. I didn't want anybody else to get hurt or killed.

My cousin Chevelle was rounding up lawyers. I didn't know at the time that Daddy had called Reverend Al Sharpton.

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"Nette, we gonna get the Trayvon Martin lawyers, Benjamin Crump and Daryl Parks. We gotta make sure you get the publicity you need, and they the new civil rights lawyers out here. What do you think?" Chevelle's voice was going in and out. I was only seeing parts of him. His long, slender fingers rubbing the top of his salt-and-pepper-speckled hair, the hem of his tailored slacks, and the leather laces of his Italian dress shoes made a quick clicking sound from him nervously tapping his foot.

I could hear Daddy's voice from the kitchen. "Yeah, my name is Leslie McSpadden, and my daughter's name is Lezley McSpadden too. She's the mother of Michael Brown. He laid in the street for four and a half hours. Yes, he was my grandson from Ferguson!" Daddy would raise and lower his voice each time he got frustrated from explaining.

It was all too much filling up my brain. I just wanted to escape. I crawled back into my bed. Random thoughts bounced inside my head. I closed my eyes, but all I saw was Mike Mike's face.

Atlanta, Los Angeles to Geneva Switzerland, and too many other cities to count. I had so many people telling me what to do, where to go, how to act, and what to say that I barely knew my name.

The lawyers insisted that me and Big Mike present a united front like two parents who had raised Mike Mike together. I was doing everything I wasn't *asked* but *told* to do.

I wasn't in any shape to speak to the media, and so I asked Chevelle to stand with me and speak on my behalf. Louis was right by my side every step of the way, which was a comforting reminder of how much this man had my back. He kept me strong enough to do what the lawyers said and appear in the media with Big Mike.

It was important to show that Mike Mike wasn't just some black boy in the hood that didn't have a daddy. No, he belonged to a family that loved him.

August 16, 2014

Governor Nixon issued a state of emergency for the Ferguson area and that they were imposing a curfew. "If we are going to achieve justice, we must first have and maintain peace," Nixon said. "This is a test. The eyes of the world are watching." I wasn't convinced that the police or the governor were really going to deliver justice, but I did feel like I was being watched.

I pulled all the blinds shut. I was starting to feel paranoid that folks knew where I lived. I was at home on the phone with Chevelle, holding my breath waiting for the police chief of Ferguson to release the name of the officer who had shot Mike Mike.

Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson stood in front of the media and shuffled his papers. He was shifting and stuttering as he presented the timeline of how Mike Mike and the unnamed officer "interacted." My breathing quickened, my skin felt clammy. As the chief stammered, he turned redder and redder.

"Umm, anyway, so I'm here, umm, to talk about, uh, two things. Uh, first of all the name of the officer involved in the shooting, and then I've got a lot of Sunshine Requests for information I'm gonna be releasing

information about a robbery that occurred on August ninth immediately preceding the, uh, altercation and shooting death of Michael Brown."

What the hell was this? I hadn't heard anything about a robbery. I was gripping the side of my chair with my other hand so tight my knuckles were turning white, as he went on and on about Missouri's law that says, "Records of public governmental bodies are open to the public." I was furious that the police were using this law now at their convenience.

"Um, it's important to note that I, uh, I have made contact with someone who is in contact with Officer Brown's family, um, to make them aware of this, uh, information being released."

I let out a loud sigh. "This is an insult! Listen to him hemmin' and hawin'. He just called my son Officer Brown!" I shouted at the TV.

I didn't want any of this to be real. This was a bad dream, and I needed somebody to wake me up. I needed Mike Mike to walk through the door and give me that playful smile so I could be like, "Boy, you play too much!"

"Um, uh, I'm sorry, the officer that was involved in the shooting of, um, uh, Michael Brown was Darren Wilson. He's been a police officer for six years, and he's had no disciplinary action taken against him. He was treated for injuries, which occurred on Saturday. Again, I won't be taking any questions at this time, but the packages will be passed out by my officers."

The police chief went on to spell out the officer's name and talk about the video they released. His name didn't tell me anything about him. That name could've belonged to a black or white man, but when I did finally see his picture, I saw evil. I saw a coward. He was this person who used his badge to his advantage. He wasn't protecting and serving anybody. I wanted to go to trial just to see the person who took my son from me in the flesh.

The police had a strategy. Their handouts to the press and the release of the Ferguson market video were conveniently released to the public. The police were crucifying my son. How was this just and fair? The police had drawn a line in the sand, making it clear that they'd protect their own by any means necessary. I knew right then and there I was about to be in the fight of my life.

But I believed that the truth would come to light.

supposedly stole, and what really happened on Canfield between that cop and my son? I wanted to go after the police hard for answers, but pushed that thought to the side, because I had just gotten slammed with the latest news that the private autopsy me and Big Mike had requested, found that Mike Mike had been shot at least six times, including four times in the right arm and twice in the head.

My head was now spinning in another direction. All of the shots were fired to the front of Mike Mike. What did all of this mean? It certainly didn't prove to me that Mike Mike was in the wrong, definitely not wrong to make it okay to fire over and over. My son was unarmed and had on flip flops. Whatever happened to officers using a stun gun? That officer unloaded his gun on a mission to kill, not arrest or ask questions. I spoke to the pathologist about how those bullets entered my son's body. He described that the bullets broke and shattered bones, and bounced around like pinballs in a game. I don't believe there was any way Mike Mike could have had any strength to charge that officer.

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I'd been driving myself crazy trying to pick apart what could have happened. So, I was anxious to finally meet the last person who was with Mike Mike and the one he had talked to last, Dorian Johnson. I was hoping he'd tell me everything that had happened, 'cause the whole Ferguson Market piece didn't fit into any puzzle for me. I had taken Mike Mike to the Ferguson Market regularly. It's one of the few stores near Mama's house. That and Sam's Market next door. Mike Mike would always go buy a green tea and some chips. I'd never taken him there and seen him buy cigarillos, though. That was a whole different store run for him.

Mike Mike knew I didn't like him smoking weed. I put my foot down about him smoking. So he'd never even think about buying a cigarillo in front of me. It just baffles the hell out of me, because the store workers knew my son. For years he had even gone there with my mama or Brittanie or my Uncle Carl. I had a lot of questions, but now I was going to finally get some answers.

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I walked into Mama's house with Chevelle and Louis. It was eerie today. Walking into the living room with all the pictures of her grandkids on the walls, in frames on the table. I brushed my hand over her black love seat that Mike Mike sat in all the time. Mike Mike's diploma was front and center on the table behind the love seat. I swallowed a dry lump in my throat. A large picture of Brittanie, Mama, and Mike Mike greeted me next. Tears began to roll down my cheeks. The coffee table had a big, framed picture of Mike Mike in his cap and gown. Mama was most proud of that one. I had to turn away. I wiped my face and walked into the kitchen and sat down with Mama at the table.

I was meeting Dorian Johnson for the first time today. My leg was shaking something fierce.

I opened the door to let Dorian in. He was thin, mousy. He was shaking too and in tears, and the first thing he said to me was, "I'm scared for my life. I don't know what to do and where to go. I think they gonna try to kill me."

I didn't have much sympathy. I know that's wrong. He was still some other mother's child. But the bitterness in me was bubbling up in my throat.

"If you knew my son and you were claiming to be a friend, why didn't you go right to his grandmother's house on Canfield when this happened and tell her what had just happened to her grandson? You kept runnin'. You already was some distance from Mike Mike. You was runnin' because you was wrong!" I said, bursting into tears. "You kept runnin' for three days. All we hearin' is that this person was with Mike Mike, but we don't know who he is. You ain't a friend; you don't know him for real!"

I calmed myself and tried to start over. "You were with my son; you could've told me everything. The police are down with the officer. They ain't gonna tell me the truth and tell me what really happened. Why did it take you three days to come talk to me?"

When we got to the funeral home, I turned to Louis and said, "I need to see Mike Mike for a minute by myself"

Then I kissed each one of my kids, shut the door behind me, and started walking down the chapel aisle. I felt like I was wading through cement as I approached his casket.

I stood beside Mike Mike, legs feeling like Jell-O. My baby boy looked good. He looked clean and sharp like he always did. I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to hear him say, "Mama, you did ya thang pickin' these clothes. I look good, right?"

I imagined me telling him, "Mike, Mike, you look real handsome. I love you so much." But I stopped myself from imagining too much, because the reality was that my son was lying there in a casket, and after the next day, I'd never see him again.

My eyes filled with tears. It was just me and Mike Mike in the room together, and seeing him laying there so still, it all settled in and I knew he was never coming back and that my life would never be the same.

I took a deep breath. I just wanted to keep my composure for my other kids.

Big Mike came into the chapel next. He had arrived wearing a button-down shirt, but then he walked out and came back in, and he was wearing a muscle shirt so he could show everybody that he had gotten a tattoo of Mike Mike's face on his back.

As we settled into the pews, Déja wanted to have her own time with Mike Mike. She walked up to the casket and just sort of stood there for several minutes, quiet. Big Mike walked up to Déja and leaned down and whispered something in her ear. Déja said something back to him. Me and Brittanie couldn't hear what they were saying, but all of a sudden, Mike squared off with Déja.

"You need to go sit down and not stand up at the casket like that. You gonna be sick."

"Naw, Daddy, I'mma be fine. I just want to look at him a li'l longer."

"You need to go sit down," he raised his voice.

Then he was shouting, "Do you know how the fuck I feel? Do you? Do you know how the fuck I feel? Do you?"

Stunned, Déja turned around and announced to the room, "Somebody come and get him."

Everyone was standing up, and there was lot of chatter coming from both sides. I rushed up and put my arms around her.

Brittanie put her arms around me and Déja, but Déja pushed us away. She walked back up to the casket and stood looking at her brother. Brittanie walked to her side.

I was in another world, and all I could see was Mike Mike in that casket, Déja, Moo Moo, Jazzy, and my mama. Everything went fuzzy after that.

down at the table for the big gala I was numb. Here I was all dressed up and feeling emptier than ever. Just then I heard a familiar voice.

"Ms. McSpadden? I'm Attorney General Eric Holder." I looked up and saw Attorney General Holder's kind face. It matched with his voice that I had heard over the phone weeks ago.

I was about to stand up, but he stopped me.

"No, you sit. I just wanted you to know that I'm here to help you in any way that I can." He kissed me on my forehead before excusing himself. I felt that comforting feeling again. I knew this man worked for a big machine, and I was just this little person, but his words helped to keep my hope alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE

Each day was a struggle, but I was coping. I was watching the news more, talking to my lawyers more, and just trying to push through the minutes and hours. The attorney general, Eric Holder, had opened his civil rights investigation for Mike Mike back in August and a full inquiry by September looking at the whole Ferguson Police Department.

Governor Nixon's state of emergency had since been lifted, and the National Guard and their tear gas, tanks, and machine guns had gone. But they were now back. The protestors weren't laying down. The county prosecutor, Bob McCulloch, had opened the state's grand jury investigation two months before, and I was trapped in the waiting game.

Meanwhile, the officer who had shot Mike Mike was still on paid leave. It had also taken till September 24, seven weeks after Mike Mike was shot, for Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson to give a so-called apology for what they did to Mike Mike. I got myself all wound up thinking back to the day I turned on the local news and saw him delivering the apology: "I want to say this to the Brown family: No one who has not experienced the loss of a child can understand what you're feeling," he said, facing the camera and standing in front of an American flag. "I am truly sorry for the loss of your son. I'm also sorry that it took so long to remove Michael from the street. The time that it took involved very important work on the part of investigators who were trying to collect evidence and gain a true picture of what happened that day. But it was just too long, and I'm truly sorry for that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

March 4, 2015

A reporter asked me once if there was anything they could do. I think I shocked him when I said, “Yes, do you have a life that I can give to my son so that he can come back?” He was speechless. That was several months before, when I was still dealing with a lot of denial about Mike Mike being gone for good.

When Mike Mike was put in the ground on August 25, 2014, I knew for sure then that he wasn’t coming back. And so I’d been fighting what felt like the world since then. It had taken a lot to keep hope alive, but the Justice Department opening its case seven months before proved to the world that Mike Mike’s death wasn’t right. I still believed that justice was possible.

The next day the Department of Justice was going to make its decision. My anxiety was starting to build up again. Cleaning up was always good therapy, but I had scrubbed the bathroom twice, fed the fish, mopped the kitchen floor, and vacuumed. Louis was at work, the kids were at school. I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin. I could hear myself breathing. It felt like the walls were starting to close in on me. I fired up a cigarette and looked out the window at the empty street, and it made me think about Mike Mike lying out there alone that day. A firelike feeling shot through my spine. I had to shake off that horrific image of my baby. I jumped into my car with a broom, my mind set on one place: Canfield Drive.

When I got out the car in front of the makeshift memorial for Mike Mike, no one was in sight. The dreadhead “cop watch” guy wasn’t even sitting in his regular lawn chair. But it was quiet, and I could be alone for a change.

With my broom in hand, I started sweeping the street and straightening up the stuffed animals. Some were dirty and worn, even had started to mildew; others were brand-new. I stood up a candle that had been knocked over. I needed to be here. I needed to feel my son. As I organized the items and swept away the trash, I wondered who all was going to be at the meeting from the DOJ. I had hoped Attorney General Holder would be there. The only other person I knew from the DOJ was Assistant US Attorney Fara Gold. She was my local DOJ contact.

We’d only met in person once, but we had developed a relationship over the phone during the last several months. Our exchanges were often volatile, because I was seeing that as much as she was saying she was on my side, sometimes she didn’t have any real answers for me. Our back-and-forth was mainly over text:

LM: What’s goin’ on, Fara? Why we ain’t got no answers and it’s goin’ on two months?

FG: Lezley, please be patient. We are interviewing witnesses. I am personally going door-to-door. Please, there is a process . . .

LM: A process? Be patient? With all due respect, Fara, the police wasn’t patient when he shot my son in cold blood. You wouldn’t be fuckin’ patient!

FG: Please try to be calm.

LM: Calm! Are you serious? I’ll be calm when this man is indicted! I’ll be calm when my son has justice!

We had many more exchanges, but in the end Fara understood that I was just a mother who was refusing to give up. I knew she’d be there the

I heard "Oh, nos" and "God, nos," and then Mike pushed back from the table, kicking his chair over. Everyone in the room jumped.

"Fuck this bullshit! Fuck all y'all! I ain't come down here for this shit!" He stormed out.

Agents from around the building ran out in the hall after him.

"Fara! What is this shit? What happened?" I pleaded.

"Lezley, after interviewing all the witnesses . . ."

"Don't tell me that crap! This man killed my son in cold blood!" I didn't give her a chance to say anything.

Meanwhile, Mike was causing an uproar. He stormed back into the room and began pacing wildly. Then he left again.

I was furious at the spectacle he had made. Then his wife, Calvina, got up and left.

I tried to catch my breath, but my mind and heart were moving too fast. I jumped up. "Fara, you owe me a better explanation than this!"

Fara startled, gripping her crutches.

"What are you doin'?" I asked, with a look of utter surprise. "Do you think that I'd hit you?"

"Well, no, no, Lezley. I just want you to calm down."

It was as if all the blood had been drained from my body. My cheeks got hot, and then I collapsed in my chair. She went on to explain and give me so many apologies that my ears overflowed. But I never heard the words I'd been longing for: that Darren Wilson would be prosecuted.

• • •

I sat in the middle of the bedroom floor. I needed and wanted to escape, to disappear. I was wishing I had something to calm me down, make me sleep, make this all go away. I was weary and broken for sure this time. I mean, how much did these people think a person could take? The lawyers were talking about the next step being a civil suit, but that wasn't going to put the cop that killed Mike Mike behind no bars. It wasn't about no money, never had been. It was about justice. We lost again. I

was numb-minded and limp as CNN played in the background. Everyone was commenting on the day, but not Mike Mike's mama. None of these motherfuckers wanted to hear what I really had to say!

I turned to the screen and was face-to-face with Eric Holder. I just kept shaking my head, wondering, *What happened Mr. Holder? You promised me. I thought you had my back. I thought you understood.*

"Michael Brown's death, though a tragedy, did not involve prosecutable conduct on the part of Officer Wilson. Now, this conclusion represents the sound, considered, and independent judgment of the expert career prosecutors within the Department of Justice. I have been personally briefed on multiple occasions about these findings."

The screen cut to the anchor, Wolf Blitzer, talking to Daryl Parks.

"I know the family, the Michael Brown family, is disappointed. But do you accept what Eric Holder said, that he personally reviewed everything and this was his conclusion?" Mr. Blitzer asked.

"Not only do we accept it, Wolf, but we thank the attorney general for his involvement. We also thank the line prosecutors and Fara Gold, who was one of the assistant US attorneys from DC involved, and many other FBI agents. If nothing else, I think that their involvement allowed us to get closer to the truth in this case. I think the truth plays a big role, in that now we know what happened. Whether or not they were able to file a federal civil rights criminal complaint against Darren Wilson is a total different issue. I think that the family, although very disappointed, in that the killer of their son continues to go free, is very disappointing to them and would be disappointing to any person who has lost their child. However, they are, as we said earlier, encouraged by the fact that the Justice Department has found the things that it found within the department. When you think about Michael Brown, think about the first thing that Officer Darren Wilson said to the boys as he approached them. He told them to 'get the F on the sidewalk.' That's just not a way that an officer should greet young men who are walking in their own neighborhood. So we are hopeful that this action by the Department of Justice in Ferguson, Missouri, will lead to some positive change."

I took my shoes off and threw them across the room. "It's bullshit! It's all bullshit!" I kicked and screamed and rolled over on my stomach and let the carpet soak up my tears. Louis cradled me in his arms, and we cried together.

* * * *

There was a knock at the door at 8:00 a.m. I couldn't imagine who was at my door. I peeked out the front blinds, and there was a FedEx truck, but I wasn't expecting a package. I looked through the front-door peephole and saw that the worker was holding up a letter.

I ran back into the bedroom and shook Louis awake. I had become so paranoid and was too afraid to answer the door.

"You expectin' a package?" I asked frantically. "They at the door."

"Just answer it," Louis said calmly.

I opened the door and there was a FedEx envelope on the mat. I sat on the couch and pulled out a letter that was on official Department of Justice letterhead. I began to read the words out loud. It was from Attorney General Eric Holder.

In between the words, I could see his kind face again. But this time something was different. It was like he was trying to justify why the officer wasn't in violation of Mike's civil rights. At the same time, he had to play his attorney general role and keep things from being too personal. But it was personal, and with each sentence that wasn't formal, I could feel that he was a black man who saw the injustice. He was a black man who knew that my son's civil rights and living rights had been violated, but maybe his hands were tied. I couldn't try to analyze it anymore. I slumped over and my hand fell limp. The letter floated out of my hand and onto the floor.



The Attorney General

Washington, D.C.

March 17, 2015

Ms. Lesley McSpadden
9764 Vickie Place
St. Louis, MO 63136

Dear Ms. McSpadden:

I am writing to offer my heartfelt condolences and deepest sympathies, both for the loss of your son Michael and for the sorrow and turmoil you have endured since last August.

It takes extraordinary courage and remarkable fortitude to persevere through a tragedy like the one you experienced. And despite the public attention that has followed, you have held on to your strength, your decency, and your boundless love for a son taken from you far too suddenly, and far too soon. As a parent of three children, I cannot imagine the pain you have endured, or the bravery you must summon each and every day in order to move forward.

Although the federal investigation into your son's death has come to a close, I want you to know that I am personally committed to doing everything I can to repair the divisions and heal the rifts that were uncovered in the aftermath of this tragedy. Our investigation into the Ferguson Police Department, which revealed the toxic law enforcement environment surrounding Michael's death, is just one step in our ongoing work to build a brighter future for all Americans, and to create a society that protects and values the lives of all young people. Your son will live on in the work that we do together.

Again, please accept my condolences for your loss. You have experienced pain that no parent should ever have to bear. And while I recognize that no words can ease the grief that inevitably remains, I want you to know that my thoughts and prayers will continue to be with you and your family.

Sincerely,

Eric H. Holder, Jr.